

John Tate

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ty of Massachusetts men's basketball team huddles before a free throw.

With his work ethic and with his mouth, Tate, a senior from Penn Hills, Pa., is a leads this year's young team.

It hasn't always been this way. Tate says he didn't understand the relationship between hard work and success until it smacked him in the face his sophomore year, when first-year coach John Calipari anchored him at the end of the UMass bench. When Tate, who starred at Penn Hills High School before coming to UMass, mustered the courage to ask why, Calipari's answer was painfully honest. "He told me 'you don't play hard and you stink,' and that's the truth," Tate remembers.

"My first reaction was 'he's crazy.' Then I sat down and thought about it and realized he's right... I really can't play the game that well. In order for me to play at all, I've got to do all the little things and play harder than the guy I'm playing against just to keep up with him."

"I never thought he'd play here. I told him that," Calipari says. "But his enthusiasm, his intensity and the understanding of his own limits is why he's been able to be such a contributor to this program. He's able to play against better players because he plays with passion."

This season, Tate has contributed 6.5 rebounds and four points per game. But the numbers do not reflect Tate's significance to this year's 14-8 UMass team.

Tate has been UMass' high-rebounder in seven games this season, including a three-game stretch in late January in which he collected 12 rebounds at Xavier, 14 at Vermont and 12 at Temple.

Tate ranks seventh on the UMass team in minutes played, second in rebounding behind Harper Williams, and first in floor

"I try to lead by example by diving for loose balls, taking charges and getting offensive rebounds," Tate says. "In practice after you've just lost and everybody's getting drilled, you step to the front of the line when everybody else is tired. Or if there's an odd number of guys you go twice to make it even."

"It's something Coach Calipari brought out of me, because I'm naturally probably the laziest person you'll ever meet... Ex-tra drills or a few bruises from diving on the floor or taking a charge, I think that's a small price to pay for being remembered as a winner."

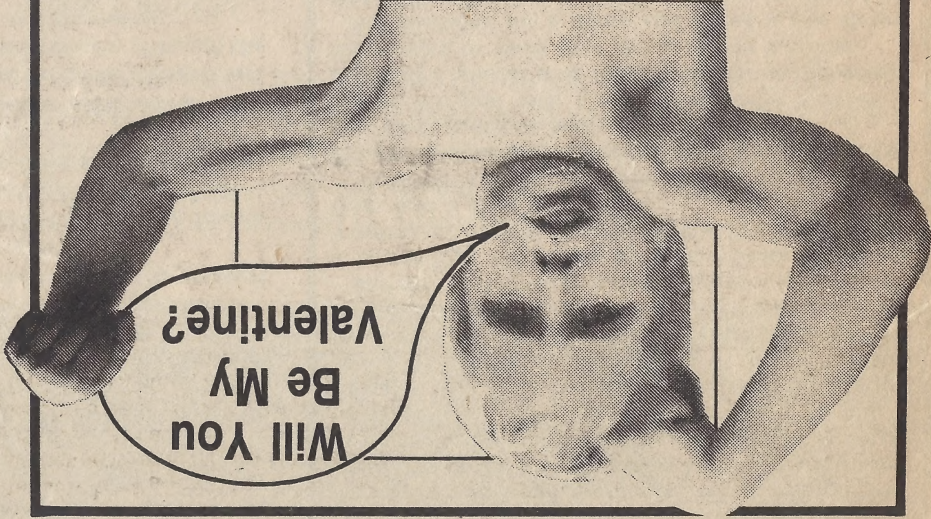
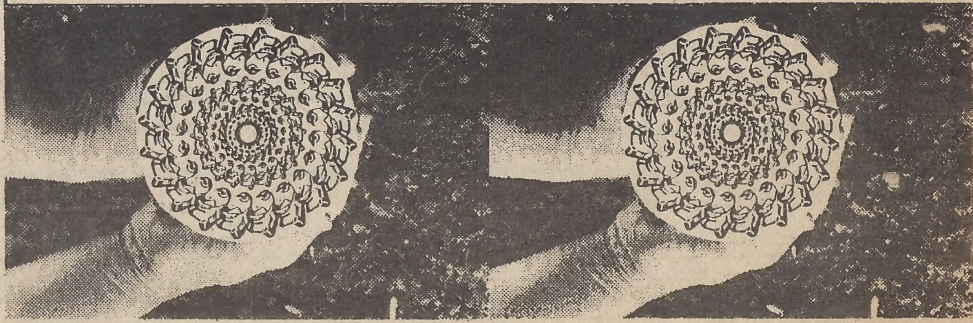
Tate's not all heart; in the quarterfinals of the Pennsylvania state tournament his senior year at Penn Hills high, Tate blocked a shot by Allidridge High's athletic star, Will Herndon.

"[Herndon] turned and tried to shoot it and I blocked him. I nearly had a stroke and I was so psyched," remembers Tate, who is now paired with Herndon in UMass' starting frontcourt while Tony Barbee recovers from mononucleosis. "I remind him of that all the time."

After the season ends in March, Tate will turn his full attention to graduation and his post-college plans, which he says are still up in the air. Tate is on track to receive a degree in history this year.

And though he knows professional basketball is not an option, Tate promises the lessons learned on the basketball court will not be forgotten.

"Coach Cal has showed me two things: If you work hard you can do anything — he's 32 and he's head coach of a Division I program — and there's no easy way. Shortcuts never really benefit you."



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